CEMENT

ORDINARY MATERIAL.
EXTRAORDINARY PROBLEMS.

A SERIES OF SHORT STORIES

HENRY VALE

CEMENT

Ordinary Material.
Extraordinary Problems.

A Series of Short Stories

Henry Vale

Contents

The Funeral	3
The Convoy	11
The Man Who Saved Receipts	14
The Confession	18

The Funeral

Nobody cried during the reading of the will.

Not at first.

The solicitor adjusted his glasses and looked down at the papers in front of him.

"To my eldest son, I leave the bungalow."
There was a small nod.

"To my daughter, the savings."
Another nod.

The solicitor turned the page.

"And regarding my funeral..."
He paused.

The room became still.

"I don't trust wood."
Nobody moved.

The solicitor looked back at the document.

"I have therefore commissioned a reinforced concrete casket."
A pause.

"Eight tonnes."
Nobody said anything.

The solicitor continued.

"'Pallbearers are advised to stand nearby for appearance only.'"

He turned another page.

"'The casket is to remain on its timber pallet throughout the lowering procedure.'"

Another page.

"'All persons involved in the lifting operation must wear suitable head protection.'"

He looked up.

"All persons."

He continued.

"'This includes the vicar.'"

There was silence.

The solicitor placed the papers neatly on the table.

"There are also drawings."

The drawings covered everything.

The approach route.

The lifting points.

The position of the crane.

The final resting place.

The churchyard had been measured.

The gate had been measured.

Unfortunately, the gate had lost.

Two days before the funeral, the funeral director visited the family with the final arrangements.

He had brought the plans with him.

"I've just got one question."
The family looked up.

"The gate."
"What about it?"
He unfolded the drawing.

"The casket won't pass through."
They looked at the measurements.

One of the family members read the note.

"'Remove gate if practical.'"
There was a pause.

"Of course."
"And if it isn't?"
The page was turned.

"'Use crane.'"
Nobody spoke for a moment.

Then someone quietly said,

"That sounds like him."

On the morning of the funeral, the crane was already there.

It had been there since seven.

The operator sat beside it drinking tea from a flask.

A few minutes later, the company lorry arrived.

It was clean.

Very clean.

The mirrors had black ribbons tied around them.

There were flowers fixed to the front.

The company logo had been polished until it shone.

Someone had clearly tried to make it look appropriate.

It almost worked.

Almost.

It was still a delivery lorry.

Normally it carried precast concrete sections.

Today it carried Arthur Foster.

People watched quietly as it parked beside the church.

Nobody said anything.

There didn't seem to be anything to say.

At the entrance to the churchyard stood two of Arthur's former work colleagues.

Both wore black suits.

Both wore high-visibility jackets over them.

On a folding table were the orders of service.

Beside them was a neat stack of yellow hard hats.

And a laminated sheet.

VISITOR SAFETY INFORMATION

- Hard hats must be worn at all times.
- Please remain within designated pedestrian areas.
- Do not stand beneath suspended loads.

Nobody laughed.

Nobody questioned it.

Each mourner accepted a hard hat.

Put it on.

Collected an order of service.

And walked through the gate.

Beyond the entrance, red-and-white barrier tape marked out an area of the churchyard.

Small timber stakes carried printed notices.

EXCLUSION ZONE

People naturally stood behind it.

The vicar arrived wearing his robes.

One of the work colleagues handed him a hard hat.

He looked at it.

Then at the crane.

Then put it on.

The rear of the lorry opened.

The concrete casket rested on a timber pallet.

On the lid, cast neatly into the concrete, was the company logo.

The same mark that had appeared for decades on retaining walls, bridge beams, culverts and lintels leaving the yard.

No flowers.

No decoration.

Just the company he had built.

The crane operator finished his tea.

Folded the paper cup.

Put on his hard hat.

"Right then."
The service began.

The crane took the weight slowly.

The two former work colleagues stood either side of the casket.

They wore sturdy work gloves.

They guided it carefully.

"Steady."
"Hold there."
"Little to the left."
The words belonged on a construction site.

Yet somehow, they seemed appropriate.

The casket rose above the churchyard wall.

Every person watched.

Not because it was shocking anymore.

Because everyone wanted to see if it would work.

The crane operator checked his measurements.

The spirit level showed perfectly straight.

He nodded.

The descent began.

The pallet went down with it.

Slowly.

Carefully.

Exactly as planned.

When the straps were removed, the two men stepped back.

One looked at the casket.

"That's him."

Someone looked over.

"What?"

The man nodded.

"Solid."

A pause.

"No fuss."

He looked at the concrete.

"Built to last."
Nobody laughed.

Because, annoyingly, it was true.

The crane operator checked everything one final time.

Then packed away the equipment.

The vicar removed his hard hat.

Looked at the congregation.

Then opened his book.

"We are gathered here today..."
And for the first time that morning, nobody looked at the crane.

The Convoy

At quarter to seven in the morning at the cement headquarters – they were all there and ready.

Number One sat in his cab cleaning his mirrors with the concentration of a man polishing a revolver.

Number Four never spoke before his first delivery.

Nobody knew why.

Number Seven chewed the same piece of gum every morning.

He claimed it was lucky.

Nobody wanted to test the theory.

Old Mick parked slightly away from everyone else.

He always did.

He said cement could smell fear.

No one argued.

At the back of the yard, Tommy climbed down from his mixer carrying a mug of tea.

He walked over to the others.

"Busy?"

One of them looked towards the order board.

"School."

Everyone went quiet.

Another driver nodded slowly.

"Cul-de-sac."
A third muttered,

"Nightmare."
Tommy took a sip of tea.

"Anyone drawn the bypass?"
The foreman shook his head.

"Not today."
You could almost hear everyone relax.

The depot gate rattled open.

The foreman stepped outside.

He didn't need to shout.

He simply looked down at the clipboard.

"Right..."
A pause.

"...let's see who's brave."
Every driver stood a little straighter.

He pointed.

"Number One."
The engine started immediately.

"Industrial estate."
A nod.

"Easy money."

"Number Four."

"New supermarket."

A shrug.

"Watch the scaffolders."

"Number Seven."

The foreman looked up.

There was almost sympathy in his face.

"Town centre."

Nobody spoke.

Number Seven slowly removed the chewing gum from his mouth.

Folded it carefully into a piece of paper.

Put it in his pocket.

"If I don't make it..."

He looked at the others.

"...tell my wife the patio wasn't my fault."

Nobody laughed.

The gate opened.

The convoy rolled out.

One behind another.

Slowly.

Purposefully.

Like men heading into territory where not everyone came back with clean wheels.

The Man Who Saved Receipts

Martin kept every receipt.

Not important ones.

Not just things like televisions or washing machines.

Everything.

Coffee. Parking. Bags of cement.

Once I saw him carefully folding a receipt from a bakery and putting it into his wallet.

"What was that for?"

"In case there's a problem."

"You bought a sausage roll."

"Exactly."

"What problem could there be?"

He shrugged.

"You never know."

Martin had a drawer at home full of them.

Thousands.

His wife hated it.

"It's not a filing system," she said.

"It's history."

"It's rubbish."

"No. Rubbish is something you throw away."

She opened the drawer.

A receipt from a petrol station fell out.

"Three years ago?"

"Good petrol."

"You can't know that."

"I can. The car still started."

I asked him if he'd ever actually needed one.

He thought about it.

"Once."

"What happened?"

"I bought a lamp."

"And?"

"It broke."

"What did the receipt do?"

"Nothing."

I laughed.

Martin looked annoyed.

"It would have helped if I needed it."

That was his argument for everything.

Not that something worked.

Just that it might.

A few months later his wife finally made him clear the drawer.

He spent an entire Sunday going through the receipts.

Most went in the bin.

Some stayed.

He had three piles: keep, throw away, and undecided.

"What's the difference between undecided and keep?" his wife asked.
Martin looked offended.

"About six months."
She just stared at him.

He carried on sorting.

One receipt took him nearly ten minutes.

He checked the date.

Turned it over.

Looked at what he'd bought.

Then put it carefully into the undecided pile.

His wife sighed.

"You know you don't have to save everything."
Martin nodded.

"I know."
He picked up another receipt.

"That's why I'm being selective."
By the end of the day, he'd thrown away forty-two receipts.

His wife was impressed.

"Well done."
Martin nodded.

Then he opened the bin.

"Just checking they're alright."

The Confession

Nobody expected Kevin to stand up.

It wasn't that sort of meeting.

It was the monthly staff meeting.

The one where everyone nodded at graphs they didn't understand and applauded figures that belonged to somebody else.

The manager had just finished saying,

"Before we go, does anyone have anything they'd like to share?"

It was a polite question.

Nobody ever answered it.

Kevin stood up.

"I've got something."

The manager smiled.

"Great. Go ahead."

Kevin took a deep breath.

"I've been pretending to know how the printer works for six years."

The room went quiet.

Someone coughed.

Kevin continued.

"I don't."

The manager laughed.

"No, seriously."

"I am serious."

"You've fixed it loads of times."

"I've pressed buttons."

"You always get it working."

"Eventually."

"How?"

"I wait until everyone leaves."

There was another silence.

Kevin looked relieved.

"I've wanted to get that off my chest."

The manager smiled.

"Kevin... that's hardly a confession."

"It isn't?"

"No."

Kevin looked at his shoes.

"Oh."

"I thought we'd all been living a lie."

The woman from Accounts put her hand up.

"I've never understood the scanner."

Kevin looked at her.

"Really?"

She nodded.

"I just put paper in it and hope."

A man from IT slowly raised his hand.

"I don't actually know what the cloud is."

Everyone turned.

"You work in IT."

"I know."

"But... what is it?"

He shrugged.

"I've been saying 'the cloud' since 2018."

The room became very still.

Someone at the back spoke.

"I don't know how to use Excel."

Another voice:

"I've been copying and pasting the same formula for four years."

Another:

"I only answer emails after waiting ten minutes so people think I've looked into it."

The manager looked horrified.

"What is happening?"

Kevin smiled.

"I think..."

"What?"

"...we've started."

"Started what?"

"The truth."

Nobody spoke for a while.

The manager looked around the room.

"So... does anyone actually know how anything works?"

The office fell silent.

Then the cleaner wandered in.

Nobody stopped talking.

She parked her trolley beside the printer.

Pulled the printer forward.

Reached behind it to empty the bin.

There was a pile of dust and debris on the floor.

Bits of dried wall filler and chunks of dry cement that had fallen from a crack above the skirting board.

She swept it up without looking.

She did it every Tuesday and Friday.

As she pushed the printer back, the plug slipped from the socket.

She caught it without looking.

Plugged it into the socket beside it.

The printer immediately burst into life.

She didn't notice.

She never looked at it.

She straightened the bin liner, pushed the printer back into place and left.

The room fell silent.

Paper began pouring out of the printer.

Page after page.

The manager looked at Barry.

Barry looked at the wall.

There were two sockets.

One had years of scratches around it.

The other looked almost new.

Barry said quietly,

"...she cleans behind there every Tuesday and Friday."
Nobody replied.

Nobody needed to.

For six years they'd been blaming the printer.

The manager slowly picked up the first page.

"We need to discuss this."
Everyone looked at him.

"Discuss what?"
He looked around the room.

"The printer."
A pause.

Then Kevin raised his hand.

"Didn't we just spend six years doing that?"
The manager ignored him.

"I'll arrange a meeting."

Nobody laughed.

Because everyone knew there would be one.

And tomorrow, at nine o'clock, they would all sit in the same room and discuss how they had finally discovered the cause of a problem that had already been quietly solved twice a week.